Founding of the United Nations
"A Profound Cause of Thanksgiving"

By Gary B. Ostrower, Professor, Alfred University

"A profound cause of thanksgiving to Almighty God…" President Harry Truman said about the work of the San Francisco Conference, which helped to draft the United Nations Charter in 1945. Truman spoke for millions of people who believed the new organization would render world wars a thing of the past. The preamble to the U.N. Charter stated its purpose clearly: "WE THE PEOPLES OF THE UNITED NATIONS determined to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war…."

Following the Conference, the State Department, together with thousands of U.N. supporters, organized what became the greatest public campaign concerning any foreign policy issue in U.S. history. It helped to ensure Senate ratification of the Charter. There would be no repeat of the Senate's rejection of the League of Nations Covenant just a quarter century earlier.

The campaign for the United Nations should remind us that the United Nations, with only 51 members at its birth, after 1945 was both an idea and an institution. As an idea, its origins can be traced back to the years before the First World War. As an institution, it grew from the wreckage of its predecessor, the League of Nations, which became one of the earliest victims of the Second World War.

Historians disagree about many issues concerning American foreign policy, but on one point they are unanimous: the United States played a critical role in the birth of both organizations. American President Woodrow Wilson (1913-1921), appalled by the destructiveness of modern warfare as evidenced in Europe between 1914 and 1918, helped father the League of Nations. Wilson believed that war was mainly a product of three things: arms races, undemocratic governments, and—most importantly—a balance of power system that he viewed as fundamentally unstable. At the Paris Peace Conference following the First World War, despite the skepticism of his British and French allies, he helped design a new "collective security" system (the term was not coined until 1935) to replace the discredited balance of power. The League stood at its center. Why collective? Because the League Covenant all but outlawed aggression, and any state violating the Covenant would be confronted by the combined might of all other League members. Wilsonian internationalists assumed, therefore, that no government would be foolish enough to violate the Covenant. And with the League obligated to promote disarmament, Wilson foresaw a world without the fear and anxiety that, he believed, had led to countless wars in the past.

Collective Insecurity

History, we know, has a way of playing tricks on us. Certainly the years between the two world wars did not work out in the way that the Wilsonians had hoped. Because the United States rejected membership in the League and its cousin, the Permanent Court of International Justice (World Court), both institutions were crippled. Although the League scored some small successes during the 1920s, the next decade would be less forgiving. Preoccupied by economic crisis and without the support of the increasingly isolationist United States, British and French officials refused to invoke the Covenant in a way that would effectively challenge the military expansionism of Germany, Japan, and Italy. Collective insecurity replaced the hoped-for collective security. The League collapsed as a second world war devastated Europe and Asia.

American planning for a new organization had begun even before the Japanese navy attacked Pearl Harbor in December 1941. The men who drafted its outlines were latter-day Wilsonians, at least in the United States and Great Britain, but they had learned a good deal from the League's mistakes. Like Wilson, they were committed to the collective-security ideal. They would not, however, mainly rely, as did the post First World War Wilsonians, on vague sentiments like "the moral opinion of mankind" to keep the peace, but more on great powers.

The Four Policemen

To guard against the hostility of homegrown isolationists, wartime planning for the United Nations was kept under wraps. Minimal publicity would presumably mean minimal hostility. The planners buried themselves deep in the State Department's bureaucracy, camouflaged by inconspicuous names like the Informal Agenda Group and the Sub-Committee on Political Problems. Led by Under Secretary of State Sumner Welles and a brilliant economist named Leo Pasvolsky, they forged ahead of America's allies in shaping the new organization. Although President Franklin D. Roosevelt (1933-1945) contributed much less to the process than had Woodrow Wilson two decades earlier, he still placed his imprint on the organization. Disillusioned by the League's failure to prevent the Second World War, he and his allies in the State Department insisted that the League's successor defer more to the Great Powers, called by FDR "the Four Policemen" (the United States, Soviet Union, Great Britain, and

China). Secretary of State Cordell Hull emphasized the need for economic equality rather than armed force to maintain the peace, but his influence remained limited.

The president also won over many of his Republican opponents. Even the Republican candidate for president in 1944, New York Governor Thomas Dewey, favored U.S. membership in a new organization. Consequently, the election of 1944 never resembled the brawl over the League during the presidential election of 1920.

This was especially important because the Dumbarton Oaks Conference met during the last months of the presidential campaign. It was at Dumbarton Oaks, a beautiful estate in Washington, that Allied negotiators began to shape the new U.N. Charter. Because the United States had been far ahead of British and Soviet officials in the planning process, the Americans effectively set the agenda. What emerged was an organization with two key bodies: (1) a large General Assembly, which would serve as a forum for debate; (2) and a smaller Security Council (with echoes of the Four Policemen), which would invoke the U.N.'s "enforcement powers." So far, the proposed United Nations resembled the old League, which also contained an Assembly and a smaller Council. But there was an important difference. Each of the major allied powers at Dumbarton Oaks—the United States, Great Britain, the Soviet Union, and China—would possess an absolute veto on matters coming before the Security Council. With the League, every country could veto enforcement action. In the United Nations, power would shift back to the Great Powers.

There were other important issues settled at Dumbarton Oaks. The United Nations would contain universal membership except for the fascist powers and their sympathizers like Argentina. Proposals to create a U.N. air force and police force were scrapped in favor of the United Nations relying on the armed forces of its members. The World Court would be reconstituted.

It is fair to say that what emerged from Dumbarton Oaks was a mix of Wilsonian idealism and old-fashioned Great Power realism. There had been some sharp disagreements at Dumbarton Oaks that reflected competing interests. But there had also been disagreements that reflected uncertainty about the main purposes of the proposed United Nations. Would the organization mainly exist to preserve world peace? Or to ensure the security of the Great Powers? Or to promote international law? Or to reflect the opinion of democratic peoples of the earth? Or to create the social and economic conditions that would make future war less likely?

Disagreements about principle and procedure were usually settled by old-fashioned political compromise. FDR was appalled when the Soviets demanded U.N. membership for each of the 16 Soviet republics. The Soviets, on the other hand, complained that they would otherwise be outvoted by the combined membership of Britain's Commonwealth and by what the Soviet leadership charged were America's clients in Latin America. The two sides compromised by accepting three, not 16, Soviet seats. Why did the United States accept the compromise? Because FDR, until he died in April 1945, understood that the U.S. Senate would never ratify the Charter if all 16 Soviet republics were included. At the same time, he wanted Soviet participation in the Pacific War. So he compromised.

He also made concessions to mollify the other Europeans. One involved colonies. FDR initially wanted no United Nations connection with the League's colonial mandate system, yet he agreed to create a U.N. Trusteeship Council as a principal U.N. organ. The Council assumed responsibility for most of the old League mandates. Britain's Winston Churchill supported this plan so long as British colonies were excluded from the U.N.'s trusteeship authority. Another important compromise involved France. FDR, who deeply distrusted Free French leader Charles de Gaulle, finally bowed to Soviet and British pressure for a French seat on the Security Council, even though France, which had surrendered to Germany in 1940, had not been a major ally during the war.

By the time that delegates from 51 countries met in San Francisco—April-June 1945—to finish drafting the Charter, much had changed. FDR had died just two weeks before the conference. Germany was on the brink of defeat. The last Japanese had been swept from Iwo Jima and the battle for Okinawa, which would bring the American navy within 600 miles of Japan's main islands, had begun. Soviet and American troops met on the Elbe River the day the conference began. Allied military success perhaps inevitably paved the way for post-war Allied competition. The San Francisco Conference postponed, but did not prevent, the Cold War.

There was an important difference between the delegates who met at San Francisco and those who had met at Paris to draft the League Covenant 25 years earlier. In 1919, many delegates (though not the battered French) really believed that a warless world was achievable. They believed that by mobilizing the "moral opinion of mankind," they could deter aggressor governments from doing what aggressors had done from time immemorial: attack their neighbors. At San Francisco, the mood was more sober. U.N.-administered economic and military power, not moral opinion, was seen as holding the key to future peace. The delegates even created a U.N. Military Staff Committee. It continues to meet, in total obscurity and without any responsibility, to this day.

More importantly, under the Charter's famous Article 51, they incorporated the right of self-defense via regional military alliances. Article 51 prepared the legal ground for alliances like NATO (1949) and the Warsaw Pact (1955). Still, the United Nations would have a role, for the right of a country to defend itself that would theoretically operate until the Security Council could seize control of a dispute. Article 51 not only addressed the general right of self-defense. It also constituted a triumph for those who argued the case for regional defense pacts. Inter-

estingly, it was the Latin Americans at San Francisco, not the Europeans, who led the charge for both regional arrangements as well as the authority of the smaller states.

Suffice to say that the United States exerted enormous influence at San Francisco, aided in part by espionage of visiting delegations. Truman administration officials believed that the stakes were just too high to allow matters to take their own course. And the most critical of those stakes involved the belief that a peaceful world depended on interstate cooperation. That was, after all, the fundamental purpose of collective security. As President Truman said in his 1946 State of the Union message: "The plain fact is that civilization was saved in 1945 by the United Nations…"

Mixed Record Of Accomplishment

As subsequent articles in this special Washington File series will suggest, the United Nations never lived up to its expectations. Its champions exaggerated its promise just as its opponents exaggerated its dangers. Moreover, the absolute veto handcuffed the Security Council during the Cold War—U.N. military action is Korea was the only significant exception. The Soviets used the veto repeatedly until about 1970; the United States has used it since then. The veto not only prevented the Security Council from utilizing its collective-security machinery in places like Vietnam and Afghanistan, but also generated disillusionment among many people who had formerly supported the United Nations.

Nevertheless, the overall failure of the United Nations as a collective-security organization should not blind us to its activity in fields ranging from human rights to economic development.

The simple fact that the founders created ECOSOC and UNESCO as principal U.N. organs says much about its non-political work. Finally, it is worth noting that the character of the United Nations would change between 1945 and 1990. Launched primarily as a Wilsonian collective-security organization, the United Nations increasingly became an anti-colonial and post-colonial forum, occasionally turbulent and polemical. The change occurred as former colonies swelled the U.N.'s membership from 51 in 1945 to 191 today. Like all institutions, the United Nations is a product—but not a prisoner—of its past. To understand it today, we have no choice but to understand its past.

Editor's Note: Professor Gary B. Ostrower is professor of history at Alfred University and recently served as a Fulbright Lecturer at Aarhus University in Denmark during the spring semester, 2005. He taught courses dealing with the Vietnam War and with American History from Truman to Clinton. He is also researching topics related to the United Nations.
